

Immigrant Voting Rights Taskforce

January 14, 4:30-6:30 PM

City Hall, Room 370

Meeting Minutes

Members Present: Abdullahi Jama, Jasmine Marwaha, Sharon Maeda, Luis Fraga, Many Uch, Rich Stolz, Hilary Stern, Alex Miller, Diane Butler

Members Absent: Jaime Garcia, Tanya Santiago

OIRA Staff Present: Aaliyah Gupta, Sahar Fathi

Guests: Sherril Huff, Julie Wise

Call to Order: 4:35 pm

Welcome (Co-Chairs)

Sharon welcomed everyone and introduced the new OIRA director, Aaliyah Gupta.

Director's Report (Aaliyah)-

Aaliyah introduced herself as the new director. She is looking forward to working with everyone. She has been working on immigrant and refugee issues for the last 15 years, and started the work as the founding Executive Director of Chaya.

Presentation by King County Elections (Sherril/Julie)

Luis opened the conversation by emphasizing that this is to give the Taskforce an opportunity to ask questions and fully understand the work that King County Elections already does. He welcomed Sherril Huff and Julie Wise and he asked everyone to introduce themselves.

Sherril opened the dialogue. She noted that there are nearly 1.2 mil voters and they are now located in building that houses all of the operations and they would love for the Taskforce to visit the facility. It was built with two purposes (1) security and (2) transparency. There is an observation loop around the entire ballot floor. There are around 70 full time employees and they hire temporary employees for special project work. Julie is a member of a three-person team that is the heart of everything done at King County elections: candidate filing, development of voter's pamphlet, phone bank, language/translation, etc. They have been developing their strategic plan and want to be proactive with outreach and education programs. They have an exceptional communications manager who has developed an outreach program for voter education that is called "Be an informed voter."

There is an analyst on staff who keeps statistics on all of the administrative functions. Success is measured a variety of different ways, like voter participation and awareness. They also measure turnout and do regular surveys. She noted that all materials are in the federally required languages of Chinese and Vietnamese. They have been keeping statistics on everything, including demographic participation rates, and King County is unique in that 70-79% of voters mail in their ballots and did so even prior to vote by mail. From an administrative standpoint, vote by mail provides far greater opportunity for accuracy and accountability. King County Elections has been able to reconcile perfectly every time.

Diane mentioned that she had heard that non-citizens who can have a driver's license can inadvertently be trapped into voting when they are asked the question of whether they would like to vote online instead of whether they are a citizen. This could make them deportable. Sherril stated that if an individual checks the box that they are a citizen and that is not accurate then that is a felony. In her 12 years there has been one circumstance that has been referred to the Prosecutor's Office related to fraud.

Abdullahi stated that due to language barriers many immigrants and refugees are unaware that the item they have received is a ballot and throw it out. Sherril agreed that the educational process associated with vote by mail has been an evolving circumstance. They also have a county-wide translation service that services approximately 180 languages. They hope that the Taskforce will spread that information as well. They are evaluating those things that the county can do to better to serve these communities. Citizenship is critical. Any citizen, to be successful in life, will be more successful if they have understanding of all of the processes that are available. Translation is part of it, but they are also interested in giving the tools so they can help each other as a community.

Rich supported more opportunity to collaborate around registration, GOTV, etc.

Per the concern that a number of people (especially older people) had signatures that didn't match Sherril responded that there are different solutions – someone can serve as a witness, for example. Julie also shared that they are doing a large voter outreach effort around this issue to get updated signatures.

Diane stated that she was surprised to find out this year that the ballots are now available online and asked why they couldn't be available in more languages. Sherril stated that Section 203 of the National Voting Rights Act comes into play. The cost for translation of ballots for languages other than English is many times over what the cost is per regular voter- approximately \$81/voter. They require every ballot issue in its entirety. They have tried to get legislation to allow for reasonable summary of ballot issues and that has not passed yet. Translation costs are complex – for example, in Vietnamese there isn't adequate translation for some of the verbiage. Past experiences with contracting with external agencies resulted in a large number of complaints around inaccuracy. They have since brought the process in-house. Also, she noted, they have 1800 people in King County who are requesting the ballot in Chinese, and a little over 800 in Vietnamese. There are no prohibitions on an external party doing the translation for their own constituencies.

Sherril stated that they did not know the registration rates of one ethnic group compared to another (i.e. African Americans vs. Latinos), but they are looking into it. Luis stated that he has a student trying to develop this system and the main barrier is determining demographic data. He asked whether it could be included on registration forms and whether State law would let them collect it in that manner. Sherril stated that if there is a demand for the data, then they will look at how to get it. Luis responded that the demand would be for the County to limit the disparate rates

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of registration and to target outreach efforts. He added that Florida is good about asking for racial/ethnic data. Another way is to survey people – it doesn't help you identify the eligible people, which something this group wants to consider because they are thinking about how to maximize the participation rates.

Jasmine stated that there is a consistent need around ELLs is a phone number for help and requested extended hours. Julie stated that they had a lot of extended hours in 2012 and they were open every single weekend in October and November.

Aaliyah asked about the process around the 180 languages that they currently have available. Julie explained that it was a language line contract similar to the one the City of Seattle has in place.

Luis thanked the speakers for coming and stated that the taskforce is looking forward to continuing to work with them. His sense is that we are not bad, and we are not perfect. He thinks we are at the far-end of doing more outreach and making it easier to register to vote. We have higher expectations for that reason.

Sherril stated that she is grateful to be doing this work in WA. WA does err on side of inclusion. She asked the Taskforce to visit her and to bring others, as they have people come from all over the world. They also have three of their most significant processes stream live during election time.

Wrap-Up (Co-Chairs)

On the whole, the Taskforce thought the presentation was very informative and useful. There seemed to be opportunity around the number of languages that were mandatory for translation and outreach. There was concern around the cost of translation and how it was represented – while translated ballots may be more costly than the production of the English ballots, the overall dollar amount represents very little of the overall budget. The larger question is why only 2600 voters are accessing these services.

On the topic of giving nonresidents the right to vote, they will look carefully at the issue. It is a different situation when folks have the power to vote.

Sharon stated that she thought the taskforce should send all of their questions to OIRA and that OIRA could write a thank you letter and forward the questions to the County.

Adjournment

6:21 pm.